**Writing Assignment 4**

From the syllabus:

In this essay, you will demonstrate an ability to use descriptive language to “paint a picture with words.” Your goal is to describe your research site so thoroughly and completely that readers can imagine themselves there. This essay will eventually become part of your final ethnographic essay. (4-6 pages.)

Unlike the previous writing assignment but like the first, this writing in some form will work its way into the final ethnographic essay, so think of this as writing the paper in advance.

Description is one of the more common “modes” of writing often taught in writing courses. What you should keep in mind is that it is based entirely in sense impressions; it is *sensual* writing, *empirical* to the core. Laurie G. Kirszner and Stephen R. Mandell in their *Patterns for College Writing*, 11th edition, explain it this way:

A descriptive essay tells what something looks like or what it feels like, sounds like, smells like, or tastes like. However, description often goes beyond personal sense impressions: novelists can create imaginary landscapes, historians can paint word pictures of historical figures, and scientists can describe physical phenomena they have never actually seen. When you write description, you use language to create a vivid impression for your readers. (144)

Kirzner and Mandell also note that there are two kinds of description: objective and subjective. In **objective description**, writers “focus on the object itself” and marshal language to give the most vivid appeal to the senses possible (144). Writers using **subjective description** focus on the personal “significance” objects have to the writer (or to the persona from whose point of view the writing is being told). The example they give may be helpful: “Thus, your desk could be a ‘warm brown rectangle of wood whose surface reveals the scratched impressions of a thousand school assignments’” (146). This description of a desk clearly contains objective elements (e.g., brown, rectangle, wood, scratched impressions) but also an emotional significance (warm) linked to memory (school assignments).

Take a similar example. In an objective description, a writer could describe a cup of coffee as a “recycled-paper cup with steaming brown liquid.” A subjective description might describe it as a “recycled-paper cup with steaming brown liquid reminding me of carafes of the stuff made at 1:00am to fuel ill-advised but necessary all-night study sessions.” Admittedly, that description might be a bit overdone, but it certainly *links an object to lived experience*—the essence of subjective description.

While objective description will be a part of this assignment, even more important is the added element of subjective description. This will put the “quality” in the qualitative research we call ethnography. When you describe your site, be sure your **unfamiliar audience** can get an impression of “what it’s like” to experience that site’s sights, sounds, smells—even its tastes and tactile sensations.

AUDIENCE: You are writing to an audience who, you assume, has never visited your site, so your descriptions will have to be thorough and somewhat reliant on common links to background you may assume your reader to have. For example, you could compare the rock wall in the Rec Center to “a towering, roughly shaped monolith reminiscent of a bizarre ancient ruin,” assuming the audience has some idea of what an ancient ruin is. Figurative language may help to make the description more interesting.

FORMAT: MLA format. Adhere to the standards of Standard Edited English

Save this document as WA4YourLastName.docx, and send it to my email address ([barnes.english@gmail.com](mailto:barnes.english@gmail.com)) by **Friday, April 1** at 12:00 noon.

**Work Cited**

Kirszner, Laurie G. and Stephen R. Mandell. *Patterns for College Writing: A Rhetorical Reader*

*and Guide*. 11th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2010. Print.